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# "I'm just gonna have to write it myself:" Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* by the Los Angeles Theatre Works

Performance review

Alice Clapie

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## Information about the show

- 1 Venue: The Rozsa Center, Houghton MI. January 23, 2018 at 7:30PM. Director: Shirley Jo Finney. Starring: Karen Malina White (Camea) and Gilbert Glenn Brown (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.). Video and scenic designer: Sean Cawelti. Sound designer: Mark Holden. Lighting designer: Daniel Ionazzi. Costume designer: Carin Jacobs. Scenic designer: Rich Rose. Music supervisor: Ronn Lipkin. Associate artistic director: Anna Lyse Erikson. Technical director and stage manager: Leia Crawford.

## Links

- 2 • LA Theater Works, *The Mountaintop*, national tour: <https://latw.org/current-tour>
- 3 • Katori Hall on playwrighting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SA5n1HoI6ZU>

## Review

[Figure 1]



Caption : The Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee.

Credits : "The Lorraine Motel - Memphis, TN-12." Flickr. December 10, 2010. Web. March 20, 2018.

- 4 "We are not made by history ; we are makers of history." Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, 1963
- 5 In an interview with the National Theatre (London), Katori Hall reflects on when she started as a playwright. She recalls a day at school when her teacher could not think of a play that featured two black women. Hall reckoned that she would just have to write that play herself, proving her determination to show "black and brown"<sup>1</sup> history on stage.
- 6 Hall's play *The Mountaintop* (2009) imagines Martin Luther King Jr.'s last night in room 306 of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. The play, which won the Olivier Award for best new play in 2009, premiered in London and then went on the West End as it failed to find venues in the U.S. The title refers to Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech "I've been on the Mountaintop" delivered on the eve of his assassination on April 3, 1968. The mountaintop symbolizes hope with biblical echoes to Moses leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech rests on a prophetic message that intended to mobilize 1960s civil rights activists in alluding to a founding myth of American identity.
- 7 Even if the author found it necessary to write a play for two black women, *The Mountaintop* casts one black woman and one black man to play Martin Luther King Jr. and Camae, an angel disguised as a chambermaid. The play focuses on the ascent and descent of a man facing his vulnerability in the face of death. Taking on aspects of magical realism and documentary theater features, *The Mountaintop* invites audiences to remember Martin Luther King Jr. with a sentimental mood. It seeks to bring together American society around one of its most iconic black men ; the play presents itself, in some ways, as a sanctuary for the history of the struggle for equality in America. It is

also encouraging the audience to understand history as a continuous progress, and the fight for equal justice as an ongoing battle.

- 8 After the English production of the play, the Los Angeles Theater Works (LATW) started touring *The Mountaintop* on a national scale in January 2018. It stars Karen Malina White (Camae) and Gilbert Glenn Brown (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) and it is directed by Shirley Jo Finney. The LATW started its national tour in the North West and then went to the Midwest before taking off to the South. The Rosza Center in Houghton, MI, was the fourth venue to welcome the group. Associated to Michigan Technological University, the Rosza Center for Performing Arts is mainly maintained by the department of Performing Arts of this technological university that offers students the possibility to broaden their horizons with minors in music, drama and theater technology. Productions are mainly run by students, faculty, or local music bands and local theater groups. That is why the LATW's production of *The Mountaintop* stood out from the regular events that the center offers.

[Figure 2]



Caption : Karen Malina White as Camae.

Credits : Photo by Matt Petit. © 2017 L.A. Theatre Works. All rights reserved.

- 9 Before the performance, the audience was informed of the hybridity of the show : “we have created a *hybrid*.” The LATW indeed mixed documentary theater and the radio play format. The group specializes in the recording of audio theatre as a teaching tool : “LATW was founded in 1974 to give voice to underrepresented groups, bring attention to new plays and playwrights, and produce plays that address critical historical, cultural and social issues.” If skeptical of the radio format at first, and at time bored of the length of dialogs, characters’ repetitive movements, and the lack of dramatic action, the performance eventually became interesting when one realized that the radio format was a means to preach, blending historical photographs, historical events, and historical format to mobilize audiences.

- 10 With only a chair, a desk, a cup of coffee, cigarettes, newspapers, and an old phone, the set was organized as a triangle between two sets of standing mikes on each side of the front stage with a big screen in the background. The screen acted as the third character of the performance, displaying historical photographs and pictures, documenting and reflecting the action on stage (e.g., smoking, a door closing, snow). This structure would define the main axis of movements of the characters moving from one set of mikes to the other when the situation on one side was too tense, and sometimes playing around the props without much conviction. The actors generally directly addressed the audience—in a Brechtian manner—delivering their speech, barely looking at each other, and yet we could feel their connection. They were impersonating their characters, taking on gestures, voices, attitudes that we would associate with stock images of Martin Luther King Jr. and a young black woman based on the stock character of black womanhood “Sassy.” And at the same time, Martin Luther King Jr.’s persona was deconstructed to sentimentally reveal the man behind the mask in the intimacy of the motel room.
- 11 While the development of this one hour thirty minutes performance appeared longer than it was, this production of *The Mountaintop* ended in a *grand finale*. If the structure of the performance overall lacked action and climatic moments, making it difficult to follow, the very end of the show brought the audience to a height of emotion. The two characters were facing the audience, speaking in the microphones, looking up, delivering a speech that intended to have a mobilizing effect as pictures on screen passed at high speed, chronologically summarizing the history of racial relationships in the United States since the death of Martin Luther King Jr.
- 12 The Rosza Center organized a Q&A session after the show with Gilbert Glenn Brown and Karen Malina White. Both insisted on the importance of political engagement and the dangers of the digitalization of modern social life. Yet, recalling of the radio preaching tradition at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, this hybrid performance associating documentary theater and the radio play format was relatively efficient. The LATW’s production of *The Mountaintop* recycles the radio play format to preach and mobilize new challenging audiences and the group’s take on Katori Hall’s play seems, despite the lack of dramatic action, to bring the audience to a height of emotions, thus reaching the mountaintop.

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## NOTES

1. “Katori Hall on playwrighting.” The National Theatre. *Youtube*. 11. 14. 2011. Web. March 8, 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SA5n1HoI6ZU>>
2. Martin Luther King Jr. “I’ve been to the Mountaintop.” *kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu*. Stanford University. April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968. Web. March 8, 2018 <[http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive\\_been\\_to\\_the\\_mountaintop/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountaintop/)>

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## ABSTRACTS

Play review of Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* by the LA Theatre Works at the Rozsa Center, Houghton MI

Compte rendu de spectacle de *The Mountaintop* par Katori Hall présenté par le LA Theatre Works au Rozsa Center, Houghton, MI.

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